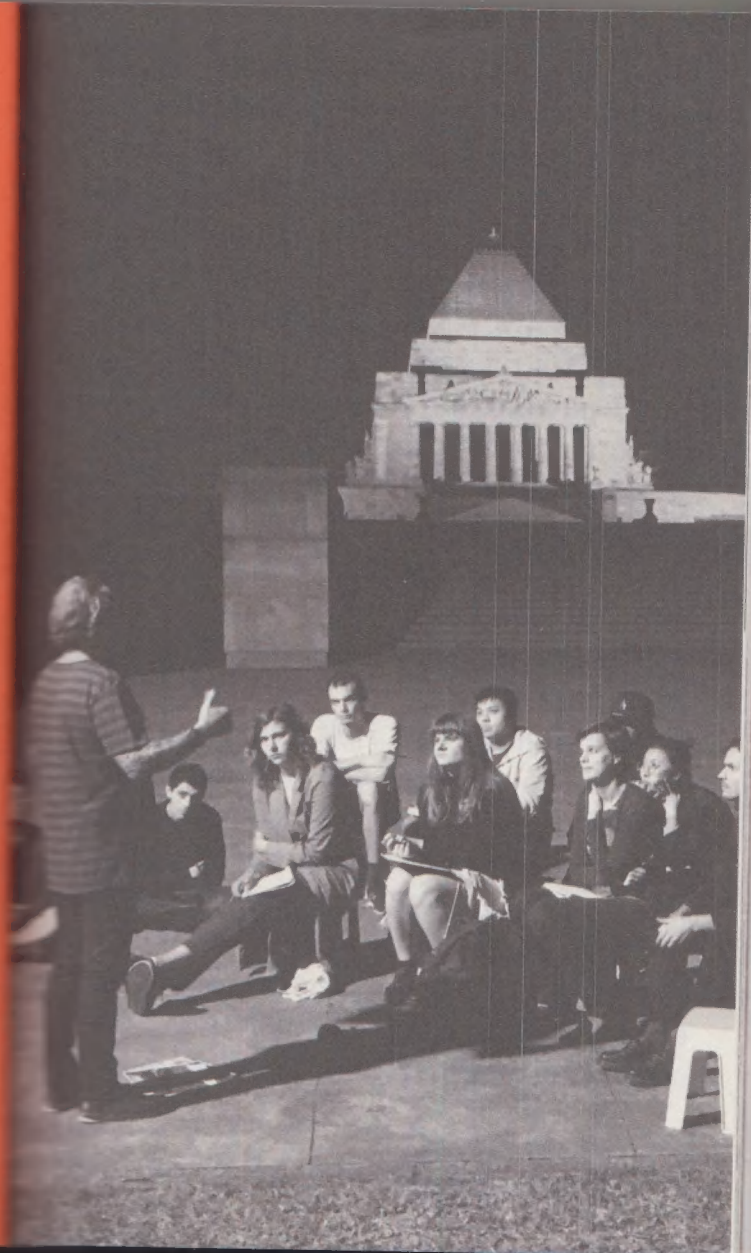


The Politics of Public Space, Volume Three
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A lot of history books will talk about Wurundjeri and Bunurong people occupying this area. What is often lost in this material, is that prior to European occupation this landscape was very different from how it appears today. From the river to as far down as Albert Park, where there is now an artificial lake, were natural marshlands and wetlands. Early in European occupation the river was turned into an ornamental river, upstream of what we now call Princes Bridge. Further downstream, it was a working river and part of the Port of Melbourne. That has two devastating effects: the damage that was done to Wurundjeri land early after the occupation changed the ecology of the landscape, but of course, it also changed the relationship of Indigenous people to land and Country.

Once the river was enclosed and the swamp was built on, the first thing that happened—and Wurundjeri people would report this—was a loss of bird

species, in particular, migratory birds from this part of Melbourne. If you're an Aboriginal person living on Country at that time, your totemic relationships to different birds and animal species are disrupted. In turn, how you engage with the environment and ecology is also disrupted. Within a very short space of time following European occupation, the combination of ecological and cultural damage changes Indigenous relationships to Country and each other.

The city grid, which was designed by Robert Hoddle after 1835, reformed the land but it also excluded Indigenous people. Richard Sennett, in his book *The Conscience of the Eye*¹, talks about the gridded city as a military formation. It is not surprising that when colonisers, particularly British colonisers, occupy Indigenous lands around the globe they create gridded cities similar to a garrison. So the gridded city is part of the notion of the garrison city. To show



▲ View of Melbourne, Victoria, from the Botanic Gardens by Henry Gritten, 1866

how much it operates as a fortress, Governor Latrobe excluded Aboriginal people. By about 1860 he began to push the Aboriginal people further and further away to the point where, as we know, they are forced onto missions and reserves.

The real point I want to make is how much ornamentation masks violence. How much that sort of design proactively masks a history of violence. It looks beautiful. I understand that. I understand that you can be attracted to ornamental beauty, but that is part of how alluring and deceptive it can be. We are sucked into notions of that picturesque beauty, and we don't question what it is obliterating. It is a process of erasure.

In some ways the Shrine is a deceptively located building. When you stand here and look towards the city it is on an axis with Swanston Street. So the Shrine purposefully addresses the grid and vice versa. I always think of it

as a frontier fortress. You've got the gridded city, the garrison, and outside the city you have the fortress. It's very purposeful. People often forget that the significance of the Shrine and the issue of commemoration ebbs and flows throughout Australian history. We are currently obsessed with national identity and war commemoration. There are times in Australian history, however, where we are not obsessed in that way, and one of these was before the building of the Shrine in the early 1920s. The First World War was such a destructive war when you consider the population of Australia and the other countries involved. When people talk about the Great War during this period, they think it is the end of war. Now we know that was naive, but people didn't have the stomach for shallow commemoration, and there was a lot of opposition to the monument. It is not surprising then that during different periods of Australian political history,



▲ The Shrine of Remembrance is a memorial honouring the service and sacrifice of Australians in war. Photo by Jorge Láscar



▼ The cenotaph displays six servicemen carrying a bier with a corpse, draped by the Australian flag. The sculpture symbolises the debt of the living to the dead. Photo by Jorge Lascar

commemoration takes on such significance. The period immediately after the Second World War, the resurrection of the ANZAC story and the beautification of war is very strong. In the late 1960s, there was a lot of anti-war sentiment in response to the Vietnam War. Coming to the moratorium marches² as a teenager in the early 1970s, the notion of the ANZAC was no longer central to national identity. So again, there wasn't much stomach for war sentiment. The current phase more or less begins in the 1990s, not with John Howard, but with Paul Keating who positioned Kokoda as a birthplace for the nation and reflects a similar fixation on identity. John Howard, following this, resurrects a very strong colonial notion of Australian identity and the commemoration of war and places like the Shrine of Remembrance return to the fore. This sentiment is almost

impenetrable today. Whether you're an activist, whether you're a writer, whether you're an academic: you'll get enormous blowback if you make any statements against the ANZAC. It is now seen as sacrilegious to question the centrality of the ANZAC myth, the place of the shrine and who we are as a nation. So this site privileges a very dominant and monumental memory of how we might think about war, how we might think about being anti-war, how we might think about peace, and how we might commemorate people other than the soldiers of the nation.

The Camp Sovereignty³ occupation began with Black GST⁴ meeting several months before the 2006 Commonwealth Games and deciding to use the presence of the media as an opportunity to expose some of the violence of colonial Australia to the world. Initially, there were reasonable discussions with the City of Melbourne, and Mayor John So actually asked if Black GST would

▲ On 12 March 2006, Camp Sovereignty established and a ceremonial fire was lit in Kings Domain, Melbourne. Photo by William West

set up a camp at the Collingwood football ground in Abbotsford. Robbie Thorpe, who led the Black GST campaign, was too smart for that and the people thought: where would we want to be? We want to be where the action is to expose the issue to the wider public. So the protest camp was set up here in Kings Domain where you have this monument to King George V. There are so many monuments around this place. There are too many. There are too many narratives and too many memories, but in a way, you can say they are all one memory. They are the memory of empire; the memory of colonial domination and they are memories that obliterate the presence of Aboriginal people.

Monuments can be silent. They only come into being when they are questioned. We live with these signifiers around us all the time, and they impact





▲ On 12 March 2006, Camp Sovereignty established and a ceremonial fire was lit in Kings Domain, Melbourne. Photo by William West

the way we see the world. With the Black GST protest, all of the monuments in this area suddenly started to speak and command attention. You had this subversive history, led by Black GST, saying there is an Indigenous history of this place which questioned all of these monuments. It questions the legitimacy of King George V, and it also questions the British legitimacy here.

Thankfully we had ANZAC day coming up, and thankfully Andrew Bolt gave us some mileage on this by getting involved—talking about the sacrilegious notion of the Camp Sovereignty flame facing off against the eternal flame⁵. The fact that you would have this *scraggly group of Aboriginal protesters*, as we were called, sitting in this camp on ANZAC day when the men and women who laid their lives down for the state were going to march by. What it became was a remarkable opportunity to question the power of

memorials and the validity of these picturesque landscapes, but people also had to face up to the fact that this unquestioned history is very fragile.

The day after Camp Sovereignty was broken up, I came back to take some photographs, and there was a bare patch of earth where the fire was held. Within 24 hours of the camp being broken up, that was gone. What the City of Melbourne did, or their contractors, was to cut out a square of earth and replace it with what I call carpet grass. So within 24 hours, any physical evidence of the occupation had been obliterated.

In a wonderful article titled *Epic Memory and Dispossession*⁶, Francesco Vitelli describes when they were digging the foundations for the Shrine they found skeletal remains of an Aboriginal person which were quickly taken away. There was a report in The Argus newspaper, but there were no further reports, and no one

knows what happened. The point is that this moment cannot become a history. It cannot become something we recognise, because as Frank says, this so-called virgin site already had a history. Those skeletal remains, which were pre-European, are physical evidence of this being an Aboriginal place. Again, it points to the fragility of colonial memory.

The recent heritage listing is part of the gross hypocrisy of commemoration in Australia. When it was first mooted, people would say, we have an Aboriginal burial site here and this will give it currency. So, Blackfellas always give you currency, and a footnote in history becomes something that is strategically important. Well if that is the case, see how they handle a land rights claim! We don't want to just talk about the Aboriginal remains to feed your claims in Victoria. We want to talk about this being an Aboriginal place prior to your brief occupation

▲ A plaque in Kings Domain pays tribute to the resting place of 38 Indigenous skeletal remains which were previously held by Museum Victoria. Photo by OFFICE

of it. We've been here for tens of thousands of years, so rather than just saying we're of value in this picturesque landscape because we have some people buried here, how do you feel about us saying that this is our place? And how do you recognise that? And you will get nowhere. That is when you will get people saying *no this is a sacred European site*. That hypocrisy shows up a lot in the way that public commemoration works. In places where you do get recognition of Aboriginal history, it becomes tokenistic if that is all it is. In other words, if we commemorate European history on the site, it is not the only thing that has happened. You also get European ownership and European cultural dominance. When you commemorate Aboriginal history through design you have to ask, where is the context? What else is happening? And if it is the only thing that



is happening, then it is reductive and can only be tokenistic because it sits in isolation.

Monuments should not be too sacred. They should allow people to engage with a narrative through their actions. We should consider the monuments that do work, how they work, and why they work. Statues in isolation are not enough. Commemoration should be brought to life by the way people interact with it. It shouldn't be a church that we creep around in. It is about life rather than our inability to think about these histories.

Notes

1. Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities*, W. W. Norton Company, 1992.
2. The Vietnam moratorium protests, the first of which took place on 8 May 1970, were the largest public demonstrations in Australia's history at the time.
3. campsovereignty.wordpress.com
4. Black GST was an Aboriginal political group, campaigning for; Genocide to end, Sovereignty acknowledged and Treaty to be made.
5. Herald Sun, Melbourne, 12 April 2006.
6. Francesco Vitelli, *Epic memory and dispossession: the Shrine and the memory wars*, Mongrel Publications 2005.

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Further Reading

Website

- tony-birch.com

Publications

- *Rise From This Grave*, Tony Birch: Overland 230, 2017.
- *We've Seen the End of the World and We Don't Accept It: Protection of Indigenous Country and Climate Justice*, Tony Birch: Towards a Just and Ecologically Sustainable Peace, Springer Singapore, 2017

Articles

- *Human Rights, Colonisation and Destruction of Country*, Tony Birch: Medium, 2016